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Special Analysis

CHILE:

Protests Test the Pinochet Regime

The regime's relations with the church and the democratic political opposition are likely to deteriorate further as a result of protest activities scheduled for today and next week. If President Pinochet responds by arresting centrist politicians, he risks deepening tensions within his government and causing a major setback to efforts to accelerate the transition to democracy.

Archbishop Fresno's unprecedented call for a national day of prayer today constitutes an open challenge to the regime. Fresno, a conservative advocate of dialogue between the regime and the democratic opposition, has implicitly warned that stronger steps are possible unless recent measures against the church are relaxed.

The day of prayer will draw large crowds to churches in poor and middle-class neighborhoods but probably will be largely nonviolent.

Leaders of the moderate Democratic Alliance coalition, who have acknowledged their credibility is at stake, are determined to use the day of prayer to stir support for large-scale peaceful demonstrations in major cities next Tuesday and Wednesday. they hope to persuade Chileans to keep children home from school, hold neighborhood rallies, and demand a return to democracy, while avoiding confrontation with security forces in downtown areas.

university students to take to the streets and public transit to be halted. The Communists and other radical leftists, many of whom have gone underground, probably will urge slum dwellers to erect barricades, attack official vehicles, and otherwise challenge the authorities.

The turnout for the protests next week may be greater than others this year despite the state of siege. It is unlikely, however, that large numbers of protesters will challenge the security forces. Nevertheless, because these forces, including military units, will be widely deployed and probably will react more vigorously than in the past, numerous injuries and fatalities appear certain.

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Political Impact

Pinochet's hardline actions and his evident intent to abort the transition process have sparked divisions within the junta.

Most junta members favor a temporary and limited state of siege. They also want Pinochet to permit Interior Minister Jarpa, the leading Cabinet moderate, to resume a dialogue with the opposition.

Pinochet probably calculates that the democratic opposition will remain divided and unable to generate widespread popular support, particularly within the middle class. He probably also reasons that leftist terrorism will continue to escalate, thus alarming many Chileans and playing into his hands.

If the opposition appears likely to succeed in mounting major demonstrations, however, Pinochet probably will order preemptive arrests of even moderate political leaders.

Such a crackdown could cause Jarpa to resign, thereby intensifying friction in the government, especially if Pinochet tries to replace Jarpa with a hardliner. The departure of the government's main conduit to the democratic opposition would bolster the extreme left's contention that Pinochet can be removed only through force.

Outlook

If next week's protests produce a large turnout, political agitation probably will continue at a high level for several more weeks, and opposition groups may attempt to organize another demonstration before Christmas. Meanwhile, terrorist bombings and other violence, which have increased markedly in recent months, probably will continue unabated.

US companies have been targets of terrorist attacks in recent months, and this pattern may intensify. Foreign investors reportedly are already becoming more cautious about investing in Chile, and a worsening of the political situation may prompt a reassessment regarding new multilateral lending to Santiago.

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